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Poems

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An Introduction to the Poems

By Ranjini Thaver

The two poems on poverty are intimately related to my emotional [first hand] and intellectual [second-hand] experiences with poverty. As a poor child growing up in apartheid South Africa, I agonized over the inability of affluent men and women of all races to understand the beauty and dignity of the poor despite our outer appearance. Now that I am educated and affluent I understand emotionally why this was so. At the intellectual level most well-meaning scholars and activists respond to poverty from the outside as a secondary process, implementing policies that are relevant to their own primary experiences. In this case, the 'catch' for most analysts has been to increase investments such as job creation opportunities and education for the poor - "teaching them to fish." Very little emphasis has been placed on interacting with the poor as equals deserving to enjoy food [eating fish] served at the same table with us. Very importantly from the perspective of the poor, is the need to be recognized for their dignity and freedom [soul food] even though they are not dressed in economic prosperity. Both poems portray these metaphors. In addition, the poem "The Prodigal Poor" reflects my exuberance at the World Bank's recent initiative to truly listen to the poor's diagnosis of poverty and resulting remedies. The World Bank has just published the first of its Trilogy on "Voices Of The Poor" titled "Can Anyone Hear Us." The second and third books will be published later this year. The editors of the Trilogy have already remarked on this project as a humbling and awe-inspiring experience. For me this is a wonderful first step. It is time to be awed by the abundance of the poor all over the world.

Fish for Thought

By Ranjini Thaver

A wise Chinese man
living in China,
passed on a wise proverb

‘feed a man a fish and you feed him for a day
teach him to fish
and you feed him for a lifetime’

decades later amidst hunger
in the slums
the third world
and among poor women

I beseech you

Teach us to fish

But first provide us
a warm plate of food

in dignity

Our spirit will soar
and our brain nourished
WILL
learn to fish

The Prodigal Poor

By Ranjini Thaver

King Midas
Let us celebrate

sacrifice your fattened cows
harvest your richest fruit
serve us at your table
for without us you are poor

naked we roamed the universe
the burning desert
revealed mirages

we
poor women and men of all hue

know the source of abundance
we are your teachers

teach us to speak your language
to read and write your way
your history and art
your scientific method

that we may speak of this abundance
in your language
for you will never understand ours

but first
let us make merry
and consecrate our marriage

Ode to My Sister

By Ranjini Thaver

Another gloomy day has begun,
another day full of pain,
Head stooping I beg
when will I be redeemed
from the hands of a tyrant?

I walk aimlessly to school,
happy that my teachers do not hurt me
although they treat my stuttering brother like a plague

A knock on the door,
She appears
the teacher grants her permission,
she glides to me with the grace of an angel
the nobility of a princess,
hands me a ticky,
“buy some sweets”

She leaves.

For a moment, for eternity,
I see her walk out the room,
so magnificently, so beautifully,
I feel redeemed,
I feel the beauty of love and life in my soul.

I know I will return to a dreary home,
but I have hope in my heart!

An angel, by a simple act of love,
has given me hope!

That angel lay in bed today,
waiting to soar the skies again!

In the meantime, I fly,
for the wings that angel bestowed upon me!

Paper Dolls at Graduation

By Ranjini Thaver

I look into the audience
There they are
Two-dimensional
women and men

Strangely,
they are all white
Clad in black suits and white shirts
Euro-male-like

They look morbid
And I wonder why?

Is it because
they are academics
Schooled in rationality
to understand life
Emotions subjugated
Except as intellects?

Is it Social-Darwinism
white superior
black inferior
Centered in the Lower brain?

Is it that women
dressed like men
think they are liberated?

Is it me?
emotional colonialism
projected onto others?

Genesis

By Ranjini Thaver

I know god of the bible is imperfect

apparently he said

‘let us make man’

he is fragmented –
spoke to himself
as if he were
different beings
spoke of man
as if women came after

he said
‘in our own image’
we are imperfect
and so is he

or perhaps this is how the story goes

those who wrote the bible
asked themselves if they were god
what they would have done

and created the bible
in their own image
narcissistically.